DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 551 TM 015 846

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TITLE Parental Involvement Programs: The Perception of Teachers and Parents toward Reading Success.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (19th, New Orleans, LA, November 14-16, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; Administrators; *Attitude Measures; *Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Participation; Parents; *Questionnaires; Reading Achievement; *Reading Attitudes; Reading Programs; Secondary School Teachers; State Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Mississippi; Parent Surveys; Teacher Surveys

ABSTRACT

The perceptions of Mississippi parents and teachers about reading success were studied through surveys about reading programs that emphasize parental involvement. The 19-item Parent Survey Questionnaire (PSQ), which was developed for the study, was administered to 44 parents; it asked them to describe their attitudes toward reading and the types of reading activities they did at home with their children. The Teacher Survey Questionnaire (TSQ), answered by 81 participants of whom 86% were elementary school teachers, 5% were secondary school teachers, and 9% were administrators), asked teachers about the importance of parental involvement and the presence of parental involvement programs in their schools. The majority (59%) of the elementary school teachers had such reading programs in their schools. The parents' survey indicated that all subjects recognized the importance of reading activities for their children. Teachers agreed that parental involvement programs improved a child's reading performance. Recommendations to improve such programs are made based on survey results. The TSQ and PSQ are presented, and results for the PSQ are listed. A 23-item list of references is included. (SLD)

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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS:

THE PERCEPTION OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS TOWARD READING SUCCESS

by

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association,
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TM015846

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Purpose

The purpose of this study was to measure the perception of Mississippi teachers and parents toward reading success by surveying the extent and effects of parental involvement reading programs.

The specific objectives of the study were to determine: (1) the attitudes of parents toward reading, and the amount of parental involvement in at-home reading activities with their children; (2) how teachers view the benefits of parental involvement in reading activities; (3) the activities that schools now have in place for parental involvement in reading; (4) additional activities that could be included in parental reading programs; and, (5) the willingness of teachers to participate in these new activities.

The survey was made using two questionnaires, one for teachers and one for parents. Parents were asked to describe reading-related activities at home. Teachers were asked to describe current reading activities that involve parents, to suggest additional activities, and to indicate a willingess to participate in these activities.

The research for the study was conducted by graduate students at Mississippi State University in June, 1990, as a class project in the graduate course EDE 8453, "Research in Reading".

Background and Literature Review

Past attitudes toward reading education were centered around a commonly-held perception that successful teaching of reading skills is primarily the responsibility of the schools. However, most educators now realize the important role that parents play as valuable partners in achieving this success.

The profound effect that parental involvement has on the reading education of children has been extensively documented over the past fifty years. It was recognized as early as 1936 (3) that "the love of reading was instilled by the recitation of nursey rhymes at the cradle." Many additonal studies (7,11) have supported the early and almost self-evident findings that parents play an important role in their child's reading success. They play this critical role because they are their children's first teachers (23).

In 1966 quantative evidence was presented (8) to support a growing perception that parents who read regularly to their children helped their children do better in school. Educators had by that time begun to recognize that there was significant improvement in a child's reading readiness (upon entering school) and successful reading experiences (in school) when parents regularily read to the child when the child was very young. As the association between both reading readiness and the acquisition of reading skills was connected to school achievement, many parents began to feel pressured to read to their children (9).

The 1985 Commission on Reading Report, Becoming a Nation of Readers (2) found that the single most important home activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. Children experience much enjoyment when parents demonstrate

that a book is a wonderful thing by reading one to them. Even if the child cannot understand the story, the child experiences the intimacy of sharing a book with a loved parent.

The Commission on Reading report also found that the parents, not the schools, laid the foundation for a child's learning to read. This report also placed on the parents an obligation to support their children's continued growth as readers. Parents and educators were asked to cooperatively participate in creating a literate society (2).

When both teachers and parents are involved in educating children, the children seem to learn to read more readily because they sense the continuity between home and school. Confident that parents and teachers are united, children develop feelings of security and become more willing to take the risk involved in learning (21). When parents become more knowledgeable about children's learning, the more the child benefits (17).

Discussion

Every study has found that parents want to play the vital role as the child's first teacher, and to be involved in their child's education (12,20,22,23). They want to understand what goes on in schools and how they can help (10,18,19). Unfortunately, many parents feel insecure about handling the task. The question then becomes one of what can be done to give the parents the skills and confidence to become an important and integral part of their child's development.

Parents who receive direct instruction in teaching fundamental reading skills to their children can help their children learn at home, even if the parents themselves have poor reading backgrounds (4,5).

These parents, working with teachers, have been found to be successful in helping their children acquire the fundamental reading skills, provided that parental involvement programs are available to help them gain the skills and confidence they need (6,13,14).

There are many different parental involvement programs already in existence (19,18,20). However, two trends in parental innvolvement appear to have emerged. One is training that will enable the parents to teach their own children fundamental reading skills parallel to, but independently of, the schools. The other is to develop cooperative programs in which the parents and teachers share, to varying degrees, this teaching task.

Although there is little evidence to support one parental involvement program over another, there is stronger support for the cooperative approach, with the parents and teachers as partners in reading education (10). This approach has led to basic guidelines (15) for establishing parental involvement programs: 1) involve parents from planning through implementation; 2) start with a long term plan to establish clear goals; 3) maintain a team effort; 4) share the leadership role between parents and teachers; 5) evaluate the program frequently, to monitor progress and the effectiveness of the program; 6) be flexible and willing to change the plan as the team gains experience.

Regardless of the approach taken, educators and school systems must still be accountable for meeting the challenge placed before them, as the leader in a team that teaches children to read. However, they must have the help of parents in order to be successful in meeting this challenge.

Who should be responsible for training parents? The school is the most logical choice to organize and conduct such programs (15). Many countries already have legislation which gives parents the right to be

involved in their children's education, and the programs that enable them to exercise this right (20).

In order to successfully attract parental involvement in reading, the schools must be prepared to offer programs to assist parents who may themselves may be weak in reading. In current times of increasing competition for decreasing resources, it is becoming increasingly difficult to expect schools to voluntary provide programs to offer such assistance.

Today there are mandates, policies, legislations, and procedures covering almost every aspect of school functions. These laws, which to some parents appear to be intrusive and an invasion of parental authority, are necessary to insure the overall health and welfare of all children. It may be necessary, therefore, to mandate that school systems develop formal programs that would involve parents in the reading education of their children. Otherwise, participation from parents in their child's education will be limited and in some cases nonexistent. However, with the mandate comes the requirement for the resources to implement the mandate.

Before any formal requirement for programs in the area of parental involvement in reading can be developed, it is first necessary to identify and assess those parental innvolvement programs that are currently in use. This assessement can then be compared with minimum program requirements in order to identify the areas that require development, the form that this development must take, whether or not formal tasking and support will be required, and the magnitudes and sources for the resources to implement these programs.

This study was the first step in such an assessment. Its

objective was a survey of existing parental involvement in the reading education of children, the perceptions held by educators as to the effectiveness of this involvement, and identification of involvement activities felt by educators to be most advantageous and cost-effective. It may very well be that this assessment could ultimately result in creation of parental involvment programs that would be implemented throughout a school system (even at the state level), and which would then require commitment of substantial resources.

Overview of This Study

This study consisted of two surveys, one of teachers and one of parents. The teachers' survey concentrated on parental involvement programs now in use, the effectiveness of these programs, requirements for new programs and activities, and a realistic view of the willingness of teachers to participate in any new programs.

The parents survey concentrated on parental reading background and habits, and on reading-related activities at home.

The teachers' survey was conducted in June, 1990, as part of the Second Annual Reading Conference held at the Wise Center at Mississippi State University. Approximately 130 Mississippi teachers and administrators received a Teacher Survey questionnaire as part of their conference registration materials. The questionnaires were developed by the class members of EDE 8453. One class member addressed the conference to explain the survey and request participation by the conference attendees.

Each member of the EDE 8453 class was responsible for distribution and collection of five Parent Survey questionnaires. The class was

instructed to distribute the questionnaires to parents in a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from lower class to upper-middle class. In all families surveyed, at least one parent (and frequently both) worked outside the home.

Teacher Survey

The Teacher Questionnaire

The Teacher Survey questionnaire is presented as Appendix A. As already noted, the Teacher Survey questionnaire was designed by the EDE 8453 class specifically for this study.

Teacher Survey Results:

The results of the Teacher Survey are summarized in Table 1.

Eighty-one participants returned the Teacher Survey questionnaire. Of these, 86% were elementary teachers, 5% were secondary teachers, and 9% were administrators. All participants surveyed were females. There was a wide range of teaching experience, although 67% of the participants had at least ten years' teaching experience. All of the secondary teachers and administrators had over ten years' experience.

All teachers and administrators surveyed thought that parental involvement was important in a child's reading success. The response to Question 8 indicated that there is noticable improvement in the progress of children whose parents were involved in reading activities with the children.

Of the administrators responding, 57% had an existing schoolwide parental involvement program in reading. The majority (59%) of the elementary teachers had parental programs in their schools, 34% did not

TABLE 1

Teacher Survey Questionnaire Results

Percentages of teachers who are presently involved, or are willing to be involved, in parental programs

Activity	Teachers Presently Involved	Teachers Willing to Be Involved	No Survey Response
Makes visits to homes for parental training	*6%*	*32%*	*62%*
Schedules parental conference times	*100%*	*0%*	*0%*
Conducts parent reading classes	*9%*	*51%*	*40%*
Sends book reading lists to parents	*38%*	*43%*	*19%*
Updates parents as to televised children's stories and programs	*23%*	*57%*	*20%*
Works after school with parents to improve child's reading	*16%*	*51%*	*33%*
Sends activities and newsletters to parents	*88%*	*10%*	*2%*

have any programs, and 7% did not respond to the question. The absence of a response should be interpreted as a negative response. None of the secondary teachers had a schoolwide parental program.

The majority of the teachers surveyed schedule parent conference times, and send activities or newsletters to parents to encourage parental involvement. Many of the teachers said they would be willing to send reading book lists to parents, conduct parent reading classes, and participate in an after-school parental program on improving children's reading.

Recommendations made by the survey group for activities to help increase parent involvement in reading included:

- encourage parents to read aloud to the children at home
- have the parents join the child at school during the scheduled reading time, and let this be a sharing time between the parent and child
- invite the parents to come into the classroom to read aloud to the entire class
- conduct parent-child gatherings at school
- form an after-school reading club for parents and children
- set up special programs for parents who cannot read, including after-school tutoring for these parents
- offer classes in reading expression for parents
- conduct parent conferences to increase the involvement of the parents
- establish a parent volunteer program
- encourage parents to involve children in summer reading programs, both at home and at school
- send home supplementary reading books so that the parents can share reading experiences with the children, especially for those parents who themselves are weak in reading.

The Parent Survey Questionnaire

The Parents Questionnaire appears as Appendix B. The source for the questionnaire is cited at the bottom of the questionnaire.

Parent Survey Results:

The results of the Parent Survey questionnaire are shown on the questionnaire in Appendix B.

Forty-four parents completed the nineteen questions contained in the Parent Survey questionnaire. Of the parents responding, 100% discuss school at home with their children. All responded that their children had time to read at home. Over 90% of the parents watch and discuss television with their children, have some type of educational experiences outside their homes, talk over school reading material with their children, attend parent conferences, and help their children with their homework.

The reported amount of reading involvement appears surprisingly high in view of the response to Question 18, in which only 73% of the parents reported that they enjoyed reading in their spare time. Only a third of the 27% of the parents who responded "no" to this question (8% of the total participants) read to their children every day. The majority (66%) of the parents played word games with their children, but only 27% wrote down stories that their children told them. As compared to the responses by teachers, 93% of the parents attended parental conferences, while 100% of the teachers surveyed scheduled them.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to measure the perception of Mississippi teachers and parents toward reading success by surveying the extent and effects of parental involvemental reading programs. The survey was made using two questionnaires, one for teachers and one for parents.

The Parents Survey Questionnaire asked parents to describe their own attitudes toward reading, and the types of reading activities that they do at home with their children. The Teacher Survey Questionnaire asked the teachers how they view the benefits of parental involvement in reading, to describe parental reading involvement in their schools, and to recommend activities to increase this involvement. The teachers were also asked how willing they would be to participate in the increased involvement, since this increased involvement would require more of their own time and effort.

The Parents Survey indicated that while only three out of four parents themselves read for enjoyment, all see the importance of reading success for their children and they enjoy sharing reading activities with their children. All encourage their children to read, and make reading time available at home for the children to read for themselves. All of the parents discuss school with their children, and almost all talk with the child the things that the child reads for school. Almost all help their children with homework, which itself becomes a shared reading experience. Most help the children select reading material, and give books for birthdays and other special occasions. Most attend parent-child gatherings at school, and many make family trips to the

local library. Since most of these activities were identified by teachers as components of successful parental involvement programs in reading, they indicate a willingness on the parts of the parents to support and participate in these programs.

The Teacher Survey indicated that the teachers feel that parental involvement programs in reading improves a child's reading performance. Most teachers now participate in, or are willing to participate, such programs. They listed, in the write-in portion of the Teacher Survey, a number of activities that they considered important to successful parental involvement programs. All already hold scheduled parent conferences, and almost all send activity notices and newsletters home. Most already do include, or are willing to include, book reading lists and recommendations for televised children's programs and stories. Most recognize the importance of reading training for the parents. While over two thirds already provide this training, or are willing to do so, the overwhelming preference is for the training to be conducted at school. Less than half now conduct, or are willing to conduct, parent training in the home. This is not surprising, in view of the violence and uncertainty in modern society.

The results of the surveys conducted in this study show that both parents and teachers view parental involvement in reading as important, and that there is strong support for these programs in the schools.

Recommendations

There is clear-cut evidence, including the results of this study, that shows that parental involvement programs significantly help children develop reading skills necessary to be successful readers.

However, while almost all parents are willing to participate in these programs, many feel intimidated because they themselves lack the appropriate reading skills, or they feel that they lack the talent for helping their children at home. It has been shown that with adequate parental involvement programs, these parents are more than willing and able to play greater, and successful, roles in their children's education, both at school and at home.

The only question remains is what is now being done, and what remains to be done, in developing the most educationally-sound and cost-effective parental programs in reading - and who should be responsible.

There is a growing tendency for schools to be tasked not only to provide reading eduction for the children, but also training for the parents to help these children learn to read in the home. Such tasking must be placed high enough on the school system's priority list that it would receive the resources necessary for development of meaningful parental involvement programs in reading.

Several recommendations for developing successful parental involvement programs can be drawn from this study.

The first, and perhaps the most important, recommendation is that all parents must be made aware that they play a major role in the reading education of their children. Every parent can do something to help their child. Things as simple as reading aloud to children, discussing school or television, and joining in with school parent-child-teacher activities are within the ability of almost every parent.

Secondly, and perhaps equally important, is that the schools must insure that all families are involved in parental involvement programs in reading, not just those families that are "education oriented."

Literate parents are far more likely to participate than those who are not. Parental involvement programs must reach the less literate, since that is the group for whom there is the most potential benefit, both to themselves and to their society.

There are several ways to reach these parents. One is the traditional parent-teacher conference. However, for these conferences to be effective, they must strengthen the partnership between parents and teachers. They must include the positive as well as negative sides to the child's reading progress. Parents must be encouraged to use these conferences to seek help, and not be frightened away.

A second way to reach parents is through parent training. Most educators surveyed in this study favored training conducted at the school. This is certainly a starting point, and is a cost-effective way of providing training. But consideration must also be given to training in the home, by qualified home/school representatives. It is unfair to the teachers to ask them to take on this responsibility and risk if they are uncomfortable doing so and are not adequately prepared.

Finally, this study represented the feelings and opinions of very small samples of teachers and parents. The teachers were reading teachers, for whom reading education is very important. Similar studies must be conducted, on vastly increased scales, to obtain input from many teachers and from many parents to determine those how parental involvement programs can be structured to give the most help to the ultimate beneficiary - the child.

APPENDIX A

Teacher Survey Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

AS A TEACHER, PLEASE RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING:

1) As a teacher, do you feel that parental involvement is important in a child's reading success?

_____ Yes _____ No

2) How many years have you taught? _____

3) What grade(s) and subject(s) are you presently teaching?

_____

4) What is the name of your school district? _____

5) What is your sex? _____ Male _____ Female

6) Have you ever taught a subject-area reading class? ____ Yes ____ No

7) Does your school have a school-wide parental involvement Program?

_____ Yes _____ No

8) According to your own observation, do you see a difference in the progress of children whose parents are involved in their reading?

DIRECTIONS: IN COLUMN A PLACE AN "X" BESIDE ANY OF THE ACTIVITIES THAT YOUR SCHOOL PRESENTLY UTILIZES IN ORDER TO INVOLVE PARENTS. IN COLUMN B PLACE A "✓" BESIDE ANY OF THE ACTIVITIES THAT YOU WOULD BE WILLING TO USE IN YOUR SCHOOL.

9)	A	B	
A)			Makes visits to parents' homes for parental training
B)			schedules parental conference times
C)			conducts parent reading classes
D)			sends reading book lists to parents
E)			updates parents as to televised children's stories and programs
F)			works after school hours with parents on improving their child's reading
G)			sends activities and/or newsletters to parents

10) Please give a brief description of any other ideas you have for involving parents in their child's reading.

_____

_____

APPENDIX B

Parent Survey Questionnaire

Directions: Please write YES next to those items that you and your child do at home. Write NO beside those items not done.

RESULTS: Percentages of parents participating in survey who answered YES or NO to each survey question

YES	*NO*		
41%	59%	1.	I read with my child every day.
91%	9%	2.	I watch and talk about TV with my child.
82%	18%	3.	My child reads many different kinds of materials.
80%	20%	4.	My child has his/her own library or bookcase.
100%	0%	5.	I talk with my child about school.
84%	16%	6.	I enjoy reading a wide variety of materials.
77%	23%	7.	I help my child select his/her reading material.
27%	73%	8.	I write down stories my child tells me.
95%	5%	9.	My child has many experiences outside our home.
98%	2%	10.	I encourage my child in reading.
80%	20%	11.	I give my child books for birthdays or other occasions.
91%	9%	12.	I talk over the things my child reads.
93%	7%	13.	I attend parent conferences at school.
70%	30%	14.	Our family visits the local public library.
66%	34%	15.	Our family plays word games.
100%	0%	16.	My child has time to read at home.
93%	7%	17.	I help my child with his/her homework.
73%	27%	18.	I enjoy reading in my free time.
91%	9%	19.	I ask my child questions about his/her books.

Questionnaire taken from International Reading Association publication Parents Programs in Reading: Guidelines for Success by Anthony D. Fredericks and David Taylor, 1985

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the class members of EDE 8453, Research in Reading, Mississippi State University, who in June 1990 conducted the surveys used in this study.

These members, listed alphabetically, were Cyndi Armstrong, Jackie Borden, Melanie Dinsmore, Amy Heair, Amy Johnson, Ethel Kilgore, Sandra Murphy, Freda Starks, Stephanie Studdard, Cindy Todd, Becky Walker and Kimberly Younger.

Jackie Borden and Kimberly Younger complied the survey data used in this study.

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